Book Review

Differentiation in ELT: A Fresh Take on Teaching Mixed-Ability Classes

Herbert Puchta and Chris Jory

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'I'm teaching 40 lessons a week … how on earth could I find the time to prepare lessons catering for my students' different learning paces, capabilities, and interests?' (p. 15). This question, presented early on in *Differentiation in ELT*, captures a common struggle among English language teachers, one that the authors, Herbert Puchta and Chris Jory, have heard repeatedly in conversations with educators around the world. In their discussions they have observed tensions about what teachers aspire to do and what their teaching conditions allow. EFL teachers genuinely desire to personalize learning, but at the same time they often feel overwhelmed and constrained by limited time or resources as well as other daily challenges such as long working hours, large classes, and the constant need to address diverse learner needs. According to Puchta and Jory, this gap between intention and practical constraints is one of the biggest difficulties teachers face.

It is no surprise, then, that many teachers come to view differentiation not as a tool for inclusion but as a source of pressure and feelings of being overwhelmed. Indeed, according to Puchta and Jory, a common misunderstanding among teachers is seeing differentiation as 'a mountain of activities' (p. 7), which includes preparing piles of worksheets or extra exercises for students at different levels. One of the authors' key goals is therefore to provide a more simplified view of differentiation. Using a rock-climbing analogy, they emphasize that effective differentiation is not about generating thousands of worksheets and endless didactic material but assisting learners to progress on their own, just as climbers do when they choose different routes that align with their strengths. Thus, with this book, they aim to present a more meaningful and flexible vision of differentiated instruction and provide teachers with research-backed guidance and clear and practical strategies to make the idea of implementing differentiation in the classroom less intimidating.

The volume is organized into eight chapters that guide readers from theory (Chapters 1, 2, 8) to practical teaching (Chapters 3–7) and present forty-eight practical strategies for differentiated instruction in EFL, showing how to adapt tasks to meet diverse students' needs without demanding extra resources or preparation time.

In Chapter 1, Puchta and Jory introduce theoretical considerations, research evidence, and their vision for differentiated instruction. Differentiation is presented as a high-impact teaching strategy (HITS) that enhances learning results and goes beyond being just a method; it represents a relational approach where teachers apply their professional judgment and establish genuine connections with their students, rather than merely considering them as average learners. Differentiation is thus understood not only as an instructional method but also as a professional mindset that involves fostering good relationships between teachers and students, setting clear goals, offering learning choices, and adjusting to different learning preferences. The chapter extends this idea by urging educators to acknowledge mixed-ability

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classrooms as a norm rather than the exception and to perceive diversity as an opportunity to enhance learning, rather than as a barrier. In Latin American contexts, such as mine in Ecuador, these ideas can be inspiring but usually present a mismatch with classroom realities. With curricula and syllabi leaving little or no room for adaptation, teachers find themselves unable to adjust lessons to address students' varied learning preferences (Velásquez-Cedeño and Argudo-Serrano 2023). While the book recognizes these issues and difficulties, it remains hopeful that changing teachers' mindsets can help overcome structural barriers such as heavy workloads, standardized tests, and institutional demands.

Building on these ideas, Chapter 2 presents a quick guide on how to use the practical strategies in the following chapters and explains in detail how these strategies follow a consistent and user-friendly structure, which includes an overview, a rationale, a clear visual of where differentiation occurs, preparation notes, practical steps, and extra support or challenges for different students' levels. Within this structure, each strategy also offers several possible combinations, such as keeping the same content but varying the task or product, or different content as well as variation on the tasks or products. Together, these features make the practical strategies presented in the following chapters easy to explore and adapt to a variety of classroom contexts.

Once the theoretical groundwork and the structure of the following chapters are set, the book turns to what teachers often ask: 'But what does this look like in class?' Chapters 3 to 7 answer the question by presenting forty-eight practical, classroom-tested ideas and strategies that help teachers bring differentiation to reality.

Chapters 3 and 5, both centered on receptive skills, offer a variety of designs to help teachers actively engage students. Rather than relying on repetitive drills, the authors incorporate brainstorming, prediction, interaction, and self-monitoring. One activity that exemplifies active student engagement is Predictive Bingo, in which all students use the same listening text, but the words they select vary according to their abilities and confidence (process and product differentiation). During preparation, the teacher exposes students to familiar audio and guides students to brainstorm topic-related vocabulary, activating their prior knowledge. Learners then make their own bingo grids, choosing how many boxes to include, depending on how challenging they want the task to be. The opportunity to make choices makes the activity naturally inclusive, as every student sets their own level of difficulty. For more advanced learners, extra challenges are suggested, such as using longer phrases or focusing on certain word types (verbs or adjectives, etc.). All together, these flexible adjustments illustrate how differentiated listening tasks can encourage active understanding and engagement without extra materials or preparation time.

The reading strategies described in Chapter 5 maintain the same focus on accessibility and active engagement. Teachers are encouraged to offer texts at various difficulty levels and design activities that activate students' prior knowledge before reading. The authors emphasize collaboration, such as working in pairs, identifying main ideas, or creating visual maps linking key concepts. Puchta and Jory further show how even simple practices such as observing and asking questions can enhance students' metacognitive reading strategies. This particular strategy resonated with me, as I have previously explored similar techniques through action research on reflective reading practices (Chumbi Landy and Ramírez Ávila 2024). This technique, together with the other collaborative activities presented in the chapter, supports the development of students' comprehension and autonomy, as well as critical awareness skills.

In Chapters 4 and 6, which focus on productive skills, the authors emphasize interaction, creativity, and scaffolding as essential ways to differentiate speaking and writing tasks. When it comes to speaking, differentiation happens through adaptable frameworks such as substitution tables, shadowing, and collaborative storytelling tasks. These techniques provide students with clear support while still allowing them to express themselves in their own way. For instance, a substitute table for speaking helps beginners build sentences confidently, while advanced learners can modify or expand language patterns to create more complex sentences. The chapter also highlights additional ideas to integrate listening and collaboration, showing how students can engage with the same material at varying levels of complexity. The collaborative nature of such activities supports mixed-ability classes by helping students to share what they know and develop language skills together.

The same idea of flexibility applies to writing skills in Chapter 6. The book integrates sentence stems, writing frames, and model texts to help learners plan and organize their ideas. Process writing is central; thus, students are guided on planning, drafting, receiving feedback, and revising, making

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the task accessible for mixed-ability groups. An engaging example of differentiated writing practice is one in which Instagram posts and mini sagas involve students in creative writing using everyday digital communication habits. The task motivates learners to write a full story in fifty words (that is, a mini saga), along with a creative title that aims to grab the reader's attention. Differentiation occurs through both process and product, as all students follow the same framework but differ in topic choice, linguistic complexity, and the editing process. The use of digital platforms, such as Instagram or class blogs, enhances authenticity and allows students to share their stories and interact with one another's work. Through these types of tasks, writing becomes more than just an academic exercise: it creates a social space that helps students see language as a means of personal expression and connection. Together, Chapters 4 and 6 show how productive skills differentiation does not necessarily require extra resources but rather involves more flexible frameworks that promote autonomy, creativity, and communication.

In Chapter 7, the authors highlight grammar and vocabulary strategies, which are far more than just structures or patterns to be memorized. This chapter highlights how reflection, collaboration, and recalling can deeply enhance the students' learning processes. In the area of grammar, Puchta and Jory advise teachers to support students in thinking about their own study habits and use retrieval tests as a low-pressure way to enable them to retain new language structures. One collaborative and interactive technique is the buddy learning system, in which students work together to review grammar structures, talk about mistakes, and give each other feedback, encouraging peer support, accountability, and awareness of language rules, making grammar learning social. Additionally, to make practice more engaging, the authors suggest activities like grammar auctions, which turn error correction into a fun game. For vocabulary acquisition, the authors highlight the usefulness of tools such as graphic organizers, word bags, and visual ways to review and grow vocabulary acquisition, to be used as support for reviewing and expanding students' vocabulary retention. Word bags, for instance, encourage students to revisit and reuse new vocabulary regularly by asking learners to collaboratively create cards with new words and put them inside an envelope or bag. Together, these strategies show how teaching grammar and vocabulary can go beyond simple drills to inspire independence and meaningful interactions, supporting the book's key idea that differentiation works best through active engagement and thoughtful reflection.

Overall, this volume provides a comprehensive and well-organized set of strategies, although many of its ideas feel well-established rather than innovative, and readers shouldn't expect entirely original concepts. Rather than introducing such new methods, the book brings together techniques that many contemporary teachers are already familiar with or that frequently appear in today's textbooks. This isn't a limitation, however; in fact, the book's strength is in clearly presenting well-founded strategies that teachers can confidently implement in their classrooms. Having said this, practical tools such as vocabulary organizers or visual vocabulary bags could have been expanded with more creative or cross-disciplinary elements, such as incorporating art or multimodal design.

Overall, the book effectively leads us from the theory of differentiation to practical and accessible ways to implement the concept. It recognizes the daily challenges faced by busy educators and offers flexible strategies that make inclusive teaching both attainable and rewarding. It is particularly recommended for in-service teachers who want a clear, consolidated overview of differentiated instruction that reinforces their understanding of widely used strategies, as well as for pre-service teachers who are getting started on their language teaching careers. Teacher educators and academic coordinators may also find it useful as a training tool, since it connects evidence-based principles with real practice in the classroom. All in all, the book effectively emphasizes that differentiation is about teaching with intention, ensuring that every student has a fair and engaging opportunity to succeed.

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The reviewer

Valeria Chumbi Landy is an EFL and ESL professor with over eleven years of teaching experience at both the secondary and university levels. She currently serves as a professor in the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages program at the National University of Education (UNAE) in Azogues, Ecuador. She holds a bachelor's degree in English Literature and a master's in Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages. She is also a PhD candidate in Education, pursuing advanced research on second language acquisition and pedagogy. Her research interests focus on vocabulary acquisition, teaching-learning processes and action research in EFL contexts.
Email: valeria.chumbi@unae.edu.ec

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